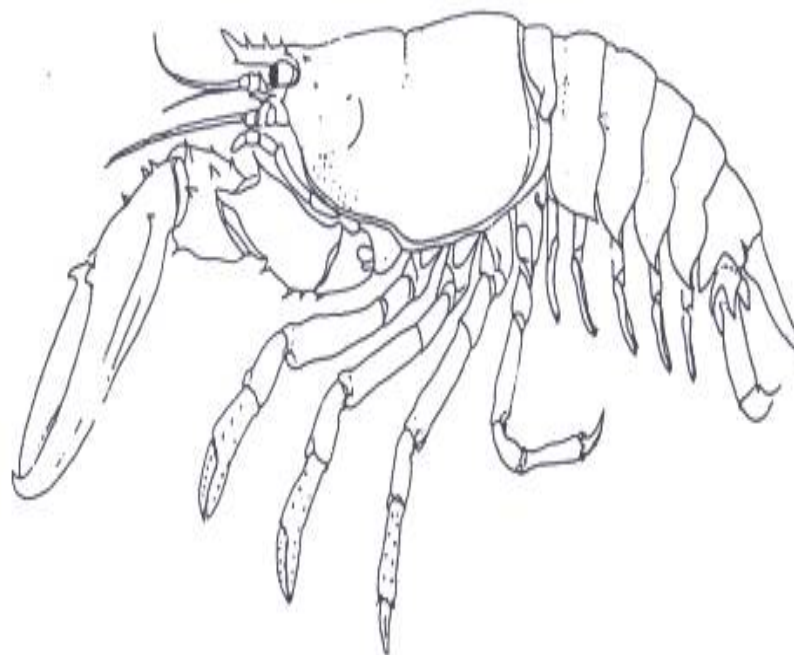


JAKEJ
THE EARLY HISTORY OF LOBSTER HARVESTING AMONG
NATIVES AND NEWCOMERS IN ATLANTIC CANADA



VOLUME 1: REPORT

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SUMMARY

(1) If the extant corpus of published oral traditions is any indication, then lobsters were not particularly important to the Mi'kmaq.

(2) Evidence from the 1980s suggests that, while some species such as eels were important to Mi'kmaq people throughout Nova Scotia, other foods such as lobsters had regional variability in reported consumption. Hence, we must be mindful of the fact that information given by Elders living in one community is not necessarily applicable to all Mi'kmaq groups.

(3) Regional variability is compounded by temporal variability, which means that modern observations, oral histories and oral traditions cannot be projected into earlier periods without other, independent evidence. In one Mi'kmaq community, lobsters were *not* eaten prior to the 1940s, but were consumed by the 1980s. Since subsistence practices changed over time, continuity between a recent practice and an earlier one must be demonstrated rather than assumed.

(4) In light of evidence for Mi'kmaq food taboos, as well as significant regional and temporal variability in resource extraction, it cannot be simply assumed that the entire natural inventory of edible crustaceans and molluscs was harvested in an aboriginal subsistence quest.

(5) As it stands now, the Mi'kmaq archaeological record contains ample evidence of invertebrate remains, but does not suggest that these aboriginal people harvested lobster at any point prior to, or at the time of, first contact with European newcomers in circa AD1500. It is reasonable to suggest that a practice that was integral to a culture and involved faunal material that is known to have survived the ravages of time should have at least some zooarchaeological evidence rather than none at all. While *Homarus americanus* is more perishable than are the frequently-recovered molluscs, this species and other closely related crustaceans with similar attributes have in fact been preserved in non-Mi'kmaq archaeological contexts.

(6) There is no question that Europeans were harvesting lobsters in Atlantic Canada as early as the sixteenth century.

(7) There is nothing to suggest that the Mi'kmaq were harvesting lobsters in the sixteenth century. However, the documentary record of that period is deficient and cannot lead to a positive conclusion for or against such a practice.

(8) The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the publication of a voluminous corpus of writings by eyewitnesses who lived among the Mi'kmaq for extensive periods of time. The "classic" ethnohistoric sources used by generations of anthropologists to reconstruct Mi'kmaq cultural practices contain much useful information on subsistence practices and identify many marine and terrestrial species. They also note the availability of lobsters in various locations and document European harvesting. However, they are silent on the matter of an aboriginal interest in the

crustacean. The only incontrovertible exception in this extensive record involves a passing remark about the Mi'kmaq use of lobster claws as makeshift smoking devices. From an anthropological perspective, much more is required before a practice can be deemed an integral feature of any given culture at any given time.

(9) The absence of documentary evidence does not necessarily mean that the Mi'kmaq *never* ate the lobsters which we know were abundant at various locations along the shoreline flats of Nova Scotia. But it does tend to vitiate any argument that these crustaceans formed an important component of their subsistence or livelihood during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Lobster was not to the Mi'kmaq what the corn/beans/squash triad was to the horticultural Huron, or what the buffalo was to the Blackfoot, or even what the crayfish was to the Maori. In all these other cases, we have extensive archaeological and written records indicating the importance of the respective foods at the time of first European contact.

(10) The first indisputable mention of a Mi'kmaq trade in lobsters is found in an obscure pamphlet published in 1787. The lobsters were evidently caught by certain Mi'kmaq who then carried them to market in canoes. It is not possible to determine from the available evidence exactly when the Mi'kmaq began adding lobsters to their market economy which was otherwise dominated by the fur trade. The evidence cannot and should not be projected back in time. There is no similar evidence for the era of the treaties over a quarter of a century earlier, much less for the date of first contact 287 years earlier. It is conceivable that the marketing of lobster was stimulated by the sudden influx of tens of thousands of loyalists after the American Revolution.

(11) By the nineteenth century, the Mi'kmaq, much like their non-aboriginal neighbours, often speared or hooked lobsters along the shoreline flats. There is evidence that at least some Mi'kmaq captured the crustacean at night with the aid of torches. Unlike the case with nocturnal salmon harvesting—which is well attested in both the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries—it is possible that a nocturnal lobster harvest was a more recent adaptation.

(12) By the nineteenth century there is also evidence that at least some Mi'kmaq were eating lobsters. Once again, there are good reasons not to project the practice into a remoter past. It is particularly important to avoid the facile and obsolete assumption that a practice recorded late in the record is a description of a “traditional” practice in earlier times. The fact remains that, unlike the case with many other marine foods, there is no evidence that the Mi'kmaq ate lobsters prior to first contact with Europeans or during the first three centuries of contact.

(13) During the nineteenth century there are two reports (dated circa 1830 and the early 1860s respectively) of Mi'kmaq selling lobsters at the Halifax fishmarket wharf. These reports complement the one made in 1787, but cannot be projected to earlier times.

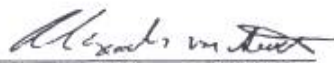
(14) As a separate industry, the Atlantic lobster “fishery” does not seem to date earlier than the beginning of the nineteenth century and did not become commercially important until after the invention of canning technologies in the 1840s and the subsequent adoption of the lobster trap.

(15) The scholarly literature, which includes numerous doctoral dissertations, books and scientific articles does not leave one with the impression that lobsters figured prominently in Mi'kmaq culture at any point in history. When lobsters are mentioned, it is only in passing. Even then, the statements can usually be traced to one particular reference by the seventeenth-century writer Nicolas Denys who alluded to the practice of spearing lobsters with the same implement that was used to capture flounders. However, Denys—whose book describes the practices of both aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples—did not identify who was doing the spearing. While the matter remains uncertain, on balance, the Denys evidence tends to point to a European rather than a Mi'kmaq practice. The passage certainly gives no indication, direct or otherwise, that the Mi'kmaq were obtaining crustaceans for subsistence or livelihood.

(16) Conservation and regulation of natural resources were not part of the historic Mi'kmaq experience, and these people were no different from other natives and newcomers who for centuries extracted resources to the limits of their technologies. Conservation is in fact largely an artifact of a relatively recent Western ideology.

(17) By the 1820s, the Mi'kmaq understood that their traditional methods, coupled with market demands, could lead to the extinction of certain animals. Hence, they requested that the Crown pass a law to prevent their own people from hunting beavers in the spring season. By the 1840s they also petitioned the Nova Scotia government to pass laws restricting the non-Mi'kmaq moose hunt.

(18) Contemporaneous evidence that the Mi'kmaq were interested in conservation measures for the lobster fishery has not been found. Of course, until the middle of the nineteenth century, the limited actions of both natives and newcomers probably made little difference to the perpetuation of the species *Homarus americanus*. However, the florescence of canneries and the adoption of the trap led to enormous increases in catches, and there followed predictable and precipitous declines in lobster stocks. It is partly for this reason that the Maritime Provinces' lobster fishery is one of the oldest continuously managed fisheries in Canada. During the nineteenth century it was principally Euro-Canadians who were involved in the harvesting, depletion and regulation of the resource.


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Date

